



# Finnish Immigration and Methodology: How to tackle Finnish challenges

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## History of Finland

Finland was under Swedish rule from the 1200's until 1809. During this time, Swedish was the official language. Records were kept similar to those in Sweden, including household examinations and following the Swedish traditions of baptism, confirmation, marriage and burials within the Lutheran Church.

In 1809, Russia took over Finland. The Russian government decided to keep the languages and customs of the Finnish people consistent. For this reason, genealogical records continued to be kept in Swedish.

In 1917, Finland gained its independence from Russia and became its own country. In 1940, Finland lost a section known as Karelia to the Soviet Union during the Winter War causing about 400,000 refugees to need to resettle within their own country.

## Naming Conventions

Finland is known for unusual surnames. There are patronymics and non-patronymic surnames. Within that, there are patronymics within both Swedish and Finnish speaking time periods. First, we will discuss patronymics.

Similar to Sweden, one takes the father's surname and add –sson or –dotter to the ending. For example, a man named Johannes Petersson's sons would be names Johannesson. His daughters would be Johannesdotters. Swedish patronymics were used in both Swedish and Finnish speaking areas into the 1880's, generally. After this time, patronymics were in Finnish. The endings became –poika and –tytär. For example, a man named Juho would have sons named Juhonpoika and daughters would be Juhontytär.

In addition, there was the use of matronymics for illegitimate children. It is not unheard of to see "Annacaisasson" as a matronymic for an illegitimate child of a woman named Anna Caisa.

There are non-patronymic surnames. There are two types: Fixed and Moveable surnames. Fixed surnames are passed from parent to offspring similar to how we think of surnames. In some areas, those names have been passed down for hundreds of years. Fixed surnames are most prominent in East Finland on the Russian side of the country. Moveable surnames are those which are not passed down. These would include farm names used as a surname (sometimes with or without a patronymic also being used.) The use of one's farm in their name goes back hundreds of years. Other types of surnames could include military or occupational surnames. It is not uncommon for Finns to switch back and forth at times, especially if they move farms.

## Language Challenges

Prior to 1880, all the records were kept in Swedish regardless of the language spoken within the community. The ministers were trained in either Sweden or Germany.

There are areas of Finland where Russian forenames are very common, especially in East Finland near Karelia. After the 1880's, all records began getting recorded in Finnish. This poses a challenge to the researcher whose ancestor might be known as John in American records, such as the 1900 census. He will be Juho (Finnish) on his marriage record in 1885 and Johan (Swedish) at his birth in 1853.

It was after the 1880's that the majority of emigrants left Finland so a familiarity of both languages is important.

## Immigration Research Strategies

Learning everything one can learn about the Finnish immigrant is important. Tracking them in all available American records is important to locate a birthplace, parents' names, dates of birth, etc. The more one learns about the person, the better.

A search through American records will be mandatory for all immigration cases. Often, the name of the farm might be located but not the parish. More likely, a region will be located.

Determining what type of surname your family had in America can be important. Does it look like a farm? Is it a patronymic? Is it something which isn't a farm?

Could the name have translated the surname? (i.e. the Brown family from Finland in American records is actually Brun, a literal translation of the name into Swedish.)

Another stumbling block is that people often find that their ancestor might have used a completely different name in America than they used in Finland.

## Helpful Websites

History and traditions: <http://www.genealogia.fi/emi/art/>

Immigration resources: [http://www.migrationinstitute.fi/emreg/genealogy\\_guide.pdf](http://www.migrationinstitute.fi/emreg/genealogy_guide.pdf)

Online Viewable Church Record Images:

[http://www.sukuhistoria.fi/sshy/index\\_eng.htm](http://www.sukuhistoria.fi/sshy/index_eng.htm) (Most free, later records via subscription)

<https://digihakemisto.appspot.com/>

Online indexes of various parish registers: <http://hiski.genealogia.fi/historia/indexe.htm>

Immigration website:

<http://www.migrationinstitute.fi/en/genealogy/emigrantregister> (Subscription)